

# With your support

Entering the final weeks of the year, we thought now was a good time to look back on where your support has been pivotal in our work for nature's recovery.

We hear from Nick Bruce-White on the highlights from his first 12 months as Devon Wildlife Trust Chief Executive, before turning to find out more about challenges and triumphs from across the charity.



I write this just as a year has passed since I was given the privilege of joining Devon Wildlife Trust as Chief Executive, so this affords me the pleasure of reflecting on all that has been achieved by the Trust over that time, with your support and that of our partners.

The year's standout achievement unquestionably must be the success of the Two Moors Pine Marten Project, a partnership led by DWT to reintroduce pine martens to Dartmoor and Exmoor, after an absence of almost 150 years. Following years of studious preparation, a military-like operation began this September, translocating the first individuals from Scotland to Dartmoor. This is truly ground-breaking nature restoration, and we look forward to engaging you more as the project progresses (turn to pages 16-23 to find out more).

On our nature reserves, we have had a keen focus on habitat improvements for rare fritillary butterflies this year, for which Devon is an incredibly important county. Despite, as I'm sure you noticed, a relatively poor year for butterflies generally, species such as the marsh fritillary and small pearl-bordered fritillary responded well to this management on reserves including Emsworthy and Marsland.

Much of my time has been focused on decision-makers, getting nature onto their agenda throughout this period of significant political change. It's early days, but I am encouraged by my meetings with our new Devon MPs. Thanks to all of you who contacted your candidates during the election – it's critical they understand how important the environment is to us all.

Having been inspired by the hundreds of communities across Devon leading amazing projects to help wildlife on their doorsteps, we launched a new Wilder Communities Award as a unique way of celebrating people who are taking nature recovery into their own hands. No matter how much DWT achieves, we believe that nature's fortunes will only turn around when at least one in four people is actively engaged with wildlife.

Last summer we surpassed 37,000 members, more than DWT has ever had before. The loyalty of our existing members and the enthusiasm of new supporters speaks volumes, I think, of the growing care and concern that people have for wildlife in Devon. It is thanks to your generosity – converting your care into action and support for DWT – that we are able to continue doing more to restore nature in the county, together. My sincere thanks to you all.

**Nick Bruce-White**  
Chief Executive,  
Devon Wildlife Trust

# Devon Wildlife Trust: our recent highlights

Here are just a few of the projects and places where together we're making a difference to Devon's nature



The task of creating a **temperate rainforest** at Devon Wildlife Trust's newest nature reserve is well underway. **Bowden Pillars** near Totnes was acquired in 2023 with support from Aviva. After undertaking detailed baseline wildlife surveys and mapping out a long-term management plan, the first trees are due to be planted this winter using saplings grown at a nearby nursery at Dartington by our friends Moor Trees.

In time the nature reserve will begin to offer huge benefits to woodland wildlife and fulfil its second crucial role: carbon capture. In fact, Bowden Pillars was the first Wildlife Trust site anywhere to be registered with the UK Woodland Carbon Code.

When Devon Wildlife Trust launched its ten-year vision back in 2021 one of its goals was to get a quarter of Devon's population 'actively engaged in wildlife'. The achievements of our **Wilder Communities** team in 2023-24 show we're making real progress:

- The team worked with 184 communities on projects to improve or create new places for nature, while an additional 447 communities were helped via events and/or webinars.
- 16 communities secured our coveted Wilder Communities Award which is given to recognise those that go beyond expectations to help local wildlife.
- 347 Wildlife Gardening awards were presented to people who had made space for nature at home.

If you or your community want help with wilding your garden, village, street, school or business then go to [devonwildlifetrust.org/wilder-communities](https://devonwildlifetrust.org/wilder-communities) to find out what we can offer.

**Ash dieback disease** continues to present big challenges to our **nature reserves team** and their loyal volunteer workforce. The disease is now badly affecting most mature ash trees throughout the majority of our 60 sites. This adds another complex set of jobs to the team's already long to-do list.

Some trees can be left in place to die and decay naturally, but in many cases we're forced to intervene to ensure public safety or to protect roads, buildings and fences. Removing trees often requires employing specialist contractors using mobile elevated platforms, which is time consuming and costly. However, it does get the job done, while also allowing us to check that any disturbance to roosting bats and other wildlife is kept to a minimum.

Our **Horse Island nature reserve** is rapidly turning into one of the South West's premier sites for wading and migratory birds. What was once an area of rough grazing land on the edge of North Devon's Taw-Torridge Estuary has become an expanse of tidal marshes, mudflats and sandbanks – a crucial resting and feeding stop for thousands of birds. With public access limited to the perimeters of the reserve, it's also one where birds, including flocks of golden plovers and lapwings, now settle without too much disturbance.

This year nature reserve staff erected an **osprey nesting platform** at the nature reserve. The beautiful birds of prey have been seen fishing at Horse Island in recent years, so the hope is that one summer a pair may decide to settle and use it as a base to raise a family.

During the spring and summer many of you got in touch to tell us how **few butterflies you were seeing** in your gardens and on countryside walks. It's a worrying trend which seems to have been repeated across the UK.

Your reports provided added urgency to our efforts to restore butterfly numbers already underway on DWT nature reserves. Last winter the muscle of staff and volunteers combined highly effectively with new machinery, including a remote-controlled robotic flail, to clear patches of bracken and gorse across **12 key reserves**. The goal was to make more space for the food plants of several kinds of butterflies, including rare species such as pearl-bordered and high brown fritillaries.

During the spring and summer 17 specially trained volunteers have been conducting regular surveys across the same reserves, counting and identifying the butterflies they see. Their findings should tell us whether we've been successful in creating the right conditions for butterflies (and many other insects). Initial results are encouraging and suggest that our efforts are starting to pay off.

Our **pioneering work with beavers** means that our project team is kept as busy as...er... beavers.

The team's day-to-day job of working with local landowners to understand what impacts beavers might have continues to grow as the animal's population gradually builds. The River Otter population is now estimated to have reached up to 25 territories. Some of these territories may contain single animals or pairs, but many hold family groups of up to 8 or so animals.

Meanwhile, a similar sized population of beavers is now established in the west of Devon along the river Tamar and its tributaries. Our beaver team is also active here working with local communities for whom beavers are a new and sometimes misunderstood neighbour.

With more and more beaver populations being discovered in river catchments across England and little notion of how they got there, The Wildlife Trusts have upped their campaigning to government on the urgent need for a **national strategy** for beaver reintroduction and future management. Only with proper planning in place can the full benefits of beavers be realised, to other wildlife, and to people, in the shape of flood alleviation, drought mitigation and improved river water quality.

Building on the success of beaver and pine marten reintroductions, Devon Wildlife Trust and its partners are beginning to investigate whether the landscapes and communities of the South West could support the return of another lost native animal: **the wildcat**.

The prospect of seeing wildcats on the ground in Devon for the first time since the nineteenth century remains some way off. But efforts led by our Wildcat Officer have made good progress, highlighting locations across the region which might be best for the animals, and what challenges need to be faced to make their reintroduction a success.

Green hay seed harvesting in North Devon



We've got a long and proud track record of **working with Devon's farmers** which stretches back for more than three decades. It's recognition that those who produce our food and manage the land have a crucial part to play in nature's recovery.

Today we have the largest number of farm advisory staff of any Wildlife Trust. Our longest established projects the Avon Valley Project, Working Wetlands and Northern Devon Natural Solutions make sure that we are now able to reach farmers in most parts of the county. Last year this meant our staff advised more than **1,000 farmers and land managers** to take action for wildlife including changing hedge management practices, planting trees, creating wetlands and undertaking river restoration projects.

Our **Saving Devon's Treescapes** project continues to do essential work restoring tree cover to Devon. Its small team delivered an impressive 45 community events, worked with 27 schools and made 80 visits to landowners all with the goal of planting native species trees to replace those lost to ash dieback disease.

Staff and volunteers established the **project's second tree nursery**, this time at Broadclyst in East Devon, while a further ten micro-tree nurseries have been set up in cooperation with community groups, parish councils and schools. Together with the project's existing tree nursery at Meeth Quarry nature reserve, these will help supply the thousands of trees the project plans to plant in future years.

Our new Broadclyst tree nursery



Planting trees at Northbrook Park



In Exeter we added to our portfolio of Valley Parks, taking on the management of a former golf course called Northbrook Park. Thanks to DWT the **urban green space**, which is owned by Exeter City Council, now has better visitor access with a new entrance and pathways already installed.

The help of local people has also allowed us to plant areas of Northbrook Park with spring bulbs and meadow flowers, along with hundreds of native species trees. An orchard made up of **traditional Westcountry apple and pear varieties** has also been established to provide a habitat and a harvest which people and wildlife will enjoy for years to come.

## Other highlights in brief

**Devon Biodiversity Records Centre (DBRC)** had a strong year. DBRC, which acts as the storehouse and information point for the county's natural history, released its Ancient Woodland Inventory for Devon: a much-anticipated guide to where these vital natural resources exist. Find out more at [dbrc.org.uk](http://dbrc.org.uk)

The last year has been important for carrying out planned improvements at several of our properties to help deliver DWT's **carbon reduction plan**. Measures include installing air source heating at two buildings and electric vehicle charging points at all our workplaces.

**Devon Wildlife Consultants**, our wholly owned ecological consultancy, had a successful year and has entered into an exciting partnership project with the Bat Conservation Trust, aimed at bringing together farmers and communities across Devon to create a more resilient landscape in the face of climate change. Learn more about their services at [devonwildlifeconsultants.org](http://devonwildlifeconsultants.org)

**The East Dartmoor Landscape Recovery Scheme**, a partnership led by Devon Wildlife Trust on behalf of eight partners, is now well underway. This pioneering project is taking place across a 5,000 hectare landscape, spanning the headwaters of the Bovey, Becka and Wray catchments. Cooperating with landowners and farmers we'll be developing a scheme to ensure this exceptionally rich landscape thrives long into the future.

**515 registered volunteers** supported our work in 2023-24 in ways which ranged from administrative support and helping at community events, to wildlife surveying and physical jobs on our 60 nature reserves.

### Thanks to you

Behind all the work and the achievement for wildlife there is a Devon Wildlife Trust community who deserve our heartfelt thanks. These good people include:

**Our 37,000 members**  
Our network of volunteer-led Local Groups

**Our 500+ volunteers**  
The people who campaign with us

**Donors to our fundraising appeals**  
and people who leave gifts in their Wills

The charitable trusts, foundations, businesses and grant giving bodies who support us



### Find the figures behind the stories

It has been another successful year for Devon Wildlife Trust's fundraising with all key income targets for the year being met or exceeded. You can find a detailed breakdown of the charity's finances in 2023-24 by going to [devonwildlifetrust.org/our-reports-and-documents](http://devonwildlifetrust.org/our-reports-and-documents)



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